

Articles on Los Angeles District Attorney Thomas Lee Woolwine (1874-1925)

* from Los Angeles Examiner, June 24, 1915

Woolwine Too Jealous; Dean Quits Office

Harry Ellis Dean, chief deputy district attorney, resigned yesterday. The resignation was accepted by District Attorney Woolwine to take effect immediately, and when the chief deputy walked out of the office yesterday evening it was not to return. There is, therefore, a \$4000 a year position to be filled.

Mr. Dean wrote a long letter of resignation, but it is nearly all preface until the following sentence is reached:

“I am not in accord with your official acts and administrative policies.”

The characteristics which he found objectionable were cited by Dean in a verbal statement.

“Mr. Woolwine,” said the retiring chief deputy as he was about to take his hat and go, “is constitutionally devious.

“He has an artistic temperament.

“He has a passion for public approbation.

In carrying out his formula for giving everyone a square deal he has had to run contrary to his constitutional peculiarities; but they kept cropping up; they are always cropping up; he can’t keep them down.

“He is not only fond of the limelight; he wants it all. Every time my name appeared in the papers ‘Tom’ jumped on me; he couldn’t stand it.

“Did you and Mr. Woolwine disagree about the Sebastian trial?”

“No; he took all the responsibility for instituting that case and for its conduct.”

Later in the day Mr. Dean gave out a second letter to Mr. Woolwine in which he said:

“Supplementary to my letter of resignation to you this morning, I desire to add the following reasons among a number of which I will not make mention of, which to my mind tended to undermine the efficiency of the office.

“The incompetence of your secret service department is subject of general comment. This department you were early in your administration advised would make or break you, and with the proof of your utter lack of capacity of your chief detective brought to your attention, at all times met with your prompt resentment in unmistakable terms. Successful results in the trial of cases necessitates the gathering of evidence by an efficient department of secret service, and to the prevention and detection of crime efficient results cannot be secured unless the department head is experienced in his work, with an apt mind for accurate deductions in the detection of crime reporting to the office.

“For weeks the county has been infested with bunco steerers, large amounts of money have been fleeced from visitors to Southern California, without any attempt upon the part of your secret service head to detect the operators, and society remains unprotected.

“Your administration has to its credit about three convictions for liquor selling in the entire county. This is a sad commentary on the efficiency of the office or indicates the

policy entirely inconsistent with your pre-election pledges. While it is true you did at all times refuse to state your views upon the subject, yet you were well aware that the voters advocating liquor regulations realized the importance of placing in the office of district attorney a man who would vigorously enforce any legislation that they might enact, and efficiency enforce the laws then provided by the statute. This matter I have commented upon several times, and have stated in unequivocal terms to you, that a continuance of the dilatory methods now employed would have to be satisfactorily explained to the voters in the affected districts."

District Attorney Woolwine only smiled when he was asked for a statement. He thereafter met all questions with that famous rejoinder: "I have nothing to say."

Nor would he intimate who is to be Dean's successor. Asa Keyes and A. H. Van Cott, deputies in the office have been mentioned.

Dean's resignation was a surprise to Woolwine. Several persons in his office knew about it before he himself found the letter ion his desk. The resignation was tendered to take effect July 6 or "at your pleasure." Woolwine accepted the letter suggestion and made it immediately.

Mr. Woolwine's reply was as follows:

"Dear Sir: I beg to acknowledge receipt of your favor of June 22, 1915, in which you tender your resignation as chief deputy district attorney to take effect July 6, 1915, or at such earlier date as may be my pleasure. In reply thereto, I desire to say that your resignation is hereby accepted to take effect immediately for the reason that I do not believe that my useful purpose may be served by delaying the matter until the sixth of July.

* from Los Angeles Record, August 17, 1916

Accuses Woolwine of Unfair Play

S. A. Woodford, campaign manager for Harry Ellis Dean, candidate for District Attorney, charges unfair tactics on the part of Woolwine supporters at a meeting held last night at 1011 Central Avenue under the auspices of the Non-Partisan league.

"Our meeting had just been called to order," declares Woodford, "when three machines, containing Frank Dominguez, Claire Woolwine, Thos. Lee Woolwine himself and others, pulled up outside and a big commotion started. They brought along a drum and fife corps and our audience stampeded to the street to see what the fuss was all about.

"They tried to address our audience. The crowd grew from 200 to 500. Finally I leaped upon Dominguez's machine and made an appeal for fair play.

"The crowd derided the newcomers and finally became so menacing that they put on power and fled from the scene."

* from Los Angeles Times, September 27, 1916

Cannot Trace Lost Ballots

If Precinct is Thrown Out Woolwine Elected

The disappearance of 102 primary election ballots cast in precinct 3, national Soldier's home district, remains a mystery. The grand jury and the eight judges who are conducting the recount utterly failed yesterday in their attempt to trace the ballots. While the probe will be continued today by the judges, Deputy District Attorney Doran said last night that the grand jury had followed all the leads imaginable without result and that body is not likely to resume the investigation.

The election officials who presided at the precinct in question, Nelson Bowerman, inspector; Newton H. Culver, Reuben Oehler, William A. Church, Luther B. Edinborough and Harry A. Strauss, appeared before the grand jury and all testified to the parts they had taken in handling of the ballots.

The officials said the missing ballots were placed in the envelope for Republican ballots, and taken together with the other ballots and placed in the treasurer's vault at the Soldier's Home, Inspector Bowerman being an orderly in the treasurer's office. He said the following morning he took the ballots to the express office and shipped them to the Registrar of Voters.

Registrar McAleer and several of his deputies were called before the judges. Mr. McAleer told of the methods applied in the handling of ballots and deputies testified to have received the ballots from No. 3 precinct. Margaret Harrington's signature was attached to the envelope which should have contained the ballots. She could not, of course, remember distinctly this particular envelope.

Judge Monroe instructed the man in charge of the county warehouse to search all the ballot boxes for the missing ballots and report this morning.

Should the ballots be found in the boxes or any other place there is a legal question as to whether they can be counted, and the search for them is more important in the matter of fixing the blame for their disappearance. It is held by prominent attorneys that the ballots, even if accidentally lost, are invalid because of the opportunity for tampering with them.

Whether the returns indicated on the tally sheets should be taken as the result of the original count is to be decided by the judges, probably today. Dist.-Atty. Woolwine and W. T. Helms, his principal opponent, were instructed last night to prepare briefs on the question.

Mr. Woolwine contends the count on the tally sheets is of no consequence when the ballots are missing. He believes that when a court is conducting a recount it can recognize only the ballots that are taken from the various envelopes and if the ballots are missing the precinct must be thrown out.

There is a provision of law which states that the result indicated on the tally sheets must be accepted as correct unless there is evidence to the contrary. This would compel the District Attorney to furnish the proof of fraud. Mr. Woolwine does not believe this provision should be applied in this particular case.

Should the entire precinct be thrown out, Mr. Woolwine will be an easy victor in the recount. According to the figures last night, he had gained 150 votes, needing but ten more to the tally sheet. Precinct No. 3, according to the tally sheet gave Mr. Woolwine 40 and Mr. Helms 33. If they are not recounted Mr. Woolwine will gain forty-three votes on Mr. Helms, more than enough to elect.

Mr. Woolwine said last night he has never charged fraud in connection with the disappearance of the ballots, but is unable to conceive of a legitimate reason for the ballots being lost.

There are about 500 precincts yet to be counted. the work should be completed tomorrow night, the judges say.

Morris P. Light, an election inspector in precinct No. 327 (?) charged with falsifying the tallies at the recent primary election, was arraigned before Justice Forbes, yesterday and released on his own recognizance till the preliminary hearing on October 5.

* from Los Angeles Times, April 28, 1918

Would Muzzle Steffens Kind

Speaking before 506 members of the Texas Society at their annual picnic yesterday at Sycamore Grove, Dist.-Atty. Thomas Lee Woolwine severely criticized all anarchists, pacifists, and in particular Lincoln Steffens, the writer and lecturer who was prevented by the police from giving an address in San Diego Friday evening.

"Steffens represents a type of plausible, curiously sincere, but utterly dangerous anarchist," Dist.-Atty. Woolwine said. "His kind camouflage the term anarchist by calling themselves 'philosophical anarchists' - whatever that may mean. He tells us that he does not stand for violence, nor the destruction of the government, nor of constituted authority by force, and yet that is the very thing that his utterances beyond doubt indicate and by his conduct he gives aid and comfort to those who outrage and seek to destroy all governmental authority.

"While professing to believe in the Christian sentiment of 'Peace on earth, good will to men,' he is the ready champion of the assassin, dynamiter and the revolutionist. For years he has taken an affectionate interest in the 'boys' who put to death by assassination twenty innocent laboring men in a newspaper building in the city of Los Angeles.

"Shortly after the arrest of David Caplan, and Matthew A. Schmidt, both of whom were accused at that time with the McNaramas of the murder of the men, Steffens journeyed cross the continent, saw me in my office and implored me not to try the cases, but to allow the defendants their liberty. I was amazed at his sincerity and earnestness in advocating this preposterous course. He actually broke down and wept in the excess of his emotion, pleading the cause of the 'boys' - the dear dynamiters who had done nothing worse than to assist in the assassination of twenty human beings.

"I answered Steffens to the effect that I looked on the defendants as cold-blooded murderers, and that I would use every power at my command to convict them. Prosecutions and convictions followed, and these destroyers of human lives are now serving their respective terms in penitentiaries.

"The hazard of allowing such men as Steffens to inject their subtle poisoning into the minds and hearts of the American people at a time when this nation is in a death grapple to perpetuate the principles upon which the nation is founded, is the height of unwise dom and folly.

"Steffen's revolutionary and anarchistic statements in San Diego as they appear in

the public press, though obscure in the deceptive paint and raiment of the harlot, are nevertheless in substance propaganda of the most insidious and dangerous character.

"The exigencies of this wartime require that Lincoln Steffens and all such conscientious but misguided romancers should be quickly and effectively muzzled for the duration of the war."

* from Los Angles Times, May 20, 1922

Commission Weighing Case of Miss Jones

The Civil Service Commission yesterday took under consideration the letter from Dist.-Atty. Woolwine giving his reasons for dismissing Miss Ida Wright Jones from his employ.

The commissioners would not indicate what if any action would be taken in the matter. The commission would either have to approve or disapprove of Mr. Woolwine's action in dismissing Miss Jones, which was based on the report that she was preparing to sell an affidavit to his political enemies for \$10,000 to the effect that she had been intimate with him.

Miss Jones has not petitioned for a hearing looking to her reinstatement. She was not represented at the meeting of the commissioners yesterday.

* from Los Angeles Times, January 6, 1923

Woolwine Gets Film Job Offer

Resignation of Thomas Lee Woolwine as District Attorney within the next few days to become the executive head of a motion-picture organization to be known as the Independent Producing Manager's Association, loomed as a strong possibility last night with the announcement by Herman I. Roth, Hollywood attorney, and nationally known throughout theatrical circles, that overtures made to Mr. Woolwine during the last ten days practically had been accepted.

"I am not in a position to say whether I am going to resign to take the film job or not," Mr. Woolwine stated last night. "Things relative to the film position are shaping up rather well but before I will know anything definite I am going to have an other conference with the heads of the undertaking.

"There is a possibility that I may take it. We have been figuring on the proposition for days and have been going into it rather thoroughly.

"Whether I accept the position or not depends on the outcome of the next conference I am going to have which will be on Monday night. Then I shall know definitely.

"The way I understand matters at present I will be expected to handle the legal and of the company. I am going into the matter more thoroughly at the next conference to learn what will be expected of me."

Acceptance of this offer by Mr. Woolwine will mean, it is said, a salary of approximately \$25,000 yearly for a period of five years.

The association which was suggested voluntarily by a number of independent producers for the purpose of exploiting their own pictures, efficiency and economy to be the watchword, was fostered and brought to a head through the work of Mr. Roth. Twelve independent producers have already have pledged themselves to such an association and three more companies possibly will be allied with the original set in a few days. Ultimately every independent producer will be linked into the association, it is said.

Mr. Woolwine if he accepts, will not become in any sense the Will Hays of the independent producers, but will look after the financial affairs of the proposed association in an advisory capacity, most of the legal work being left to Mr. Roth.

The independents are not seeking to rival or oppose other organizations already formed in the motion picture field, but seek co-operation between independents for economy and efficiency, and to the end that their pictures get fair break with those of the larger organizations, which, through their power, have better distributing facilities.

At present there are about twenty-six independent producers, all handling their pictures independently, and most of the time at a concession far below the actual worth and value of the picture. This the association proposes to remedy by arranging financial matters so that the small producer may be able to cope with the larger ones by securing loans and funds at opportune times, all in the interest of better, cleaner and more elaborate pictures.

A conference of the members of the association will be held Monday night at the office of Mr. Roth in the Hollywood Security Bank Building. At that meeting organization will definitely be effected, and Mr. Woolwine will announce his decision. Overtures were first made to Mr. Woolwine about ten days ago by Mr. Roth, representing the different producers, and it is being accepted by them without a doubt that Mr. Woolwine will resign immediately to take over the work of the association.

The independent producers have been handicapped in getting distribution, it was said, having had to pay such heavy brokerage to distributing agencies that the profit was eaten up. It will be part of Mr. Woolwine's duties to seek a remedy for this situation. The association also expected to get more favorable banking terms than the individuals have had and will benefit also by the interchange of ideas and actors.

The new association, in the words of a statement made yesterday following the meeting, is "not to be antagonistic to nor in opposition to nor to fight any existing organization, or combination or group of men that are now in the motion-picture business, but solely for the purpose of assisting them and to obtain the value for their pictures and have the same relief through such a channel as may hereafter be decided upon. Nor will the association be formed as a sort of combination in restraint of trade or try to have control of the motion-picture industry but solely for the purpose hereinbefore mentioned. Offices for that purpose will be opened at the Hollywood Securities Building in conjunction with Mr. Roth, also for the practice of law appertaining to the motion-picture industry.

"The plans proposed and if carried out will be to economize and make the best pictures possible. There is no possibility of any over-production of pictures, because there always will be a market for good, clean pictures."

According to the claims of the association as tentatively outlined, all parts of the industry will be linked closely so that the utmost economy will be possible. Sets of pictures finished by one company will be saved, catalogued and announced to all

producers in the association, enabling them to use them immediately for their own productions if possible and at a great saving. This plan alone, it is said, will save the producers millions of dollars each year....

* from Los Angeles Times, March 21, 1925

Woolwine Suit Is Thrown Out

Holding the communications objected to were privileged and that evidence submitted was insufficient to constitute a cause of action, Judge York of Superior-Court yesterday granted a motion dismissing the suit for \$75,000 damages brought by Ida Wright Jones against Thomas Lee Woolwine, former District Attorney, and others, for asserted defamation of character.

Judge York threw the case out of court after hearing arguments Thursday afternoon on the motion for a nonsuit, which was offered by W. J. Ford, attorney for Woolwine, and Will Anderson counsel for the other defendants.

Miss Jones's complaint was based on stories published relative to her dismissal from the District Attorney's office by Woolwine in May, 1922. She declared her reputation had been injured by Woolwine, who wrote a letter to the Civil Service Commission stating he had discharged Miss Jones because information had come to him that she was planning to make an affidavit stating she had been intimate with Woolwine and sell it to his political enemies for \$10,000. On the witness stand Miss Jones denied she had ever planned to make such an affidavit or dispose of such information to his opponents.

Woolwine, who is convalescing from a serious illness that befell him in Europe more than a year ago, was not in court during the trial, as his physicians ordered he be secluded from his attorney.

* from Los Angeles Times, June 6, 1923

Judge Scores Prosecutor

Judge Monroe in Superior Court yesterday in dismissing a criminal action against Capt. Jose Fonseca, formerly an aviator in the Mexican army, bitterly arraigned the District Attorney's office for inefficiency and "for cluttering up the courts."

The court "bolted over" when the prosecutor arose and moved that the case against Fonseca be dismissed because of insufficient evidence.

In dismissing the case, Judge Monroe declared that the suspect had been in jail for three or four months because of the loose method employed by the District Attorney and his assistants. The District Attorney's office knew, he declared, that there was insufficient evidence to convict the prisoner when the latter had his preliminary hearing yet he was kept in jail and finally dragged into Superior Court, where already the docket is overcrowded.

Judge Monroe declared further that the tactics of the District Attorney's office were hampering the efforts of the courts to dispense justice and were aggravating the congestion in the County Jail.

Fonseca was charged with the theft of an automobile from a local concern. He contended that he had rented the automobile and told the officials of the concern from whom it was rented that he would not return it for some time. He stated further that the company told him he could use the machine as he wished if he paid the rent for it.

Fonseca drove the machine to Fresno, where he was arrested and brought back here. He was given a preliminary hearing and then held to answer to the higher court.

* from Los Angeles Times, July 9, 1925
(from Woolwine's obituary)

From the date of his acceptance of the office, Dist.-Atty. Woolwine was constantly in the limelight of publicity. If he was not being attacked, he was assailing somebody else. One of the first attacks launched against him was one by an organization known as the Law Enforcement League. The league endeavored to have Dist.-Atty. Woolwine removed from office on charges of "failure to do his duty," but he was exonerated in 1916 amidst a scene of flying fists when his attorney, W. J. Ford, struck the opposing counsel twice on the chin.

William Thomas Sherman, wts@gunjones.com, <http://www.gunjones.com>